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ABSTRACT

Observations of children's responses to picture books in three first-to-fourth-grade classrooms over a two-year period helped to form a descriptive framework for children's responses to picture books. Field notes, transcripts, and other data revealed that when children talked about picture books, they used the lexicon of the expert. They seemed comfortable using terms like "end pages," "title pages," "illustrator," and so forth. When words from the adult world failed them, they simply made up their own. When talk served an informative function, children simply pointed out the contents of the illustrations or they compared the contents in one book to another book. Children used the heuristic function to wonder or make inferences about the artists' techniques as well as the pictorial text. The imaginative function of language was often used to create new forms or to make the unfamiliar familiar through the use of metaphors or similes. At other times imaginative language represented an inner mental reorganization or creation of new images. Many of the comments children made about picture books served a personal function. As children used language for many purposes in reading picture books, their comments showed them to be developing more critical thinking skills, not only in cognitive factors but also in aesthetic awareness. (HOD)

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Thinking, Language and Reading: Children's Responses to Picture Books

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Thinking, Language and Reading: Children's Responses to Picture Books

The teacher had read Richard Kennedy's picture book The Song of the Horse to her third and fourth graders. It is a challenging book for nine- and ten-year olds, a book full of contrasts: black and white illustrations, stillness and motion, reality and fantasy, the outer physical world and the inner world of the mind. In the beginning as child and horse prepare for their morning ride, the illustrtions sit solidly on a single page; but as the horse and rider leave the barn and paddock behind, they burst out of the book in images and words. Kennedy writes:

> We run past the wind, past the shouting of praises, past the cheering and into stillness, past sound and into silence....We run into a place where all is perfectly still, and there is no difference in anything and no sameness in anything, and in this great empty moment, a song is singing.

As the teacher read the book, the children were thinking and talking. They talked about the black and white illustrations, they recalled their own riding experiences, and they argued about the story. Parker, a realist, insisted the story couldn't be true. "He's telling about his dream," he insists. "No," replied another fourth grader, "It's not like that. It's like when you go off some place by yourself and it's a special place and you're like totally leaving the other world. I think when he was running with the horse he had a special feeling." Heather confided, "I always get that kind of feeling when I'm playing the piano or singing a real sad song." Tessie, age 10, was sure that the rider's experience was real. She explained, "When they said the song and stuff, sometimes when it's a brisk morning and you walk in the woods or something like, you get that feeling, and you'll hear water in

the stream or a brook or the wind, and that's what I think they meant by the song. When you do that you sort of go into another world and you leave all your problems behind you or you can work them out."

Tessie's comment represents surprising insight on the part of a ten-year-old: insight that was part of thinking, language and reading that centered around a single book. Thinking, language and reading did not end with the closing of this book, however. The children exploded into an energy of drawing and writing. Heather reported, "The illustrations catch your eye and then you don't want to let the book go. You just want to get ahold of it and keep it until you've done all the illustrations."

The children drew and painted pictures to illustrate poetry they had written about horses. The teacher collected other books about horses and the children thought and talked and read again. Many of them visited the library on their own after school to check out more horse books, and they continued to write and create art until the room was covered with their work.

Matt, a third grader, expressed my own surprise at the extent to which The Song of the Horse had inspired such depth of language and thinking. "That's funny how one book can do so much," he exclaimed. "It starts up this big, giant thing about horses.

Many of us have experienced the special magic that happens when children get involved in and enthused about a book. But what kind of context can nurture such enthusiastic responses? How do these responses change as children mature? What, indeed, are the dimensions of children's responses to piture books? These were questions which led to observations in 3 first-to fourth-grade classrooms over a two-year period--observations which helped me to form a descriptive framework for children's responses to picture books and which identified patterns of thinking, language, and reading which hold

implications for today's classrooms.

At the outset of the study, as I reviewed research which concerned children and picture books, I found studies often fell into two categories: research which asked if illustrations interfered with reading processes, and research which considered the types of illustrations children preferred in books.

For many years researchers concluded that illustrations played a negative role in learning to read. Samuels (1970), for example, concluded that pictures interfered with the acquisition of sight words and that pictures used as adjuncts to printed text did not facilitate comprehension. He thus recommended that pictures be kept out of the child's text. Yet in such studies researchers separated text and pictures, and the reading process was often reduced to simple words in isolation or words and pictures in isolation. These instruments had little relationship to a picture book: an art form which hinges on the "interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages and on the drama of the turning page? (Bader, 1976, p.1). More recently, in fact, both Schallert (1980) and Levin (1981) have now shown that when illustrations support or extend the written text, as they do in a good picture book, prose learning is facilitated.

Researchers who pursued the question of children's preferences for illustrations used similar methods and instruments which bore little relationship to the object of study and failed to account for variations among individual children. Smerdon (1976), for example, flashed pairs of black and white drawings on a screen at five second intervals. Children ages 6-15 were asked to view the pairs and to mark their preferences in a response booklet. The results led him to conclude that children preferred realistic illustrations to less representational drawings. Other researchers drew

similar conclusions depending on which variables were isolated; they found that children liked color better than black and white, preferred representational drawings to abstract, and familiar content to the unfamiliar.

In addition to distorting the art object that is a picture book, researchers who asked children what kind of illustrations they liked did not probe beneath the surface of immediate reactions to study individual responses to a particular book. Yet such responses can be very complex, involving cognitive as well as affective processes and taking days or weeks as well as seconds to emerge (Purves and Beach, 1972).

Because of the problems with empirical research regarding children and picture books, and in the light of recent understandings from the fields of literary response and language learning which emphasized the importance of context in learning situations, I chose to adapt methods of ethnography to observe children responding to real picture books in natural settings--elementary school classrooms.

I assumed the role of participant-observer in three classrooms, two combination first/second grade and one combination third/fourth grade, over a period of forty weeks. I recorded my observations of classroom interaction in descriptive notes and anecdotal records, and transcribed tape recordings of class and peer discussions. Toward the end of observation periods specific data were collected in interviews and activities. Children were read a fairy tale without the illustrations. In individual or small group interviews they were asked to compare three illustrated versions of the tale. One class of first and second graders looked at versions of The Bremen Town Musicians while the third and fourth graders looked at Hansel and Gretel.

The classrooms in the study were part of alternative schools in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio, which used methods of informal education adapted from

British systems. The curriculum was organized around themes such as Time, Japan, or Horses, and children's literature was the medium of instruction. Teachers read to children several times a day and provided time for discussion during this reading. Each class had an extensive library which was supplemented by the school library as themes of study changed. Children were encouraged to read alone and with each other and to respond to books in many ways--through writing, art work, and drama.

I examined field notes and transcripts over a period of days and weeks, and certain themes or domains of response began to emerge from the data. One of these themes was the variations among children in the way they chose books, the way they looked at books, what they saw in books, and what they said about books. This last category, the children's verbal responses, formed the bulk of the data.

As I listened to children talking about picture books, I found them using a special register--the lexicon of the expert. They seemed comfortable using terms like 'end pages,' title pages,' 'illustrator,' 'media,' 'acrylics,' 'watercolor,' or 'charcoal,' and they used such vocabulary appropriately. But when words from the adult world failed them, they simply made up their own, using terms like 'lushy' or 'sprite' to describe pictures. A first grader assured me that an artist had used "color concussion" to create one-color woodblock prints, while a third grader had chosen to read Jonas' Round Trip because it had "obstacle illusions."

As they talked, the children seemed to use language for many purposes. Piaget has given us a picture of children as active constructors of meaning as they grow and learn. Linguist Michael Halliday has defined seven functions of language children use in learning how to mean. As I examined the children's verbal responses over the course of the study, I found them hard at work

bringing meaning to their picture books. Adapting Halliday's functions I categorized their verbal responses under four main themes: informational, heuristic, imaginative, or personal (see figure 1).

When talk served an informative function, children simply pointed out the contents of the illustrations or they compared the contents in one book to another book they were familiar with. Third and fourth graders looking at a dog in Van Allsburg's Wreck of the Zephyr recalled seeing the same dog in Van Allsburg's The Garden of Abdul Gasazi. At other times children compared objects in pictures to objects in the real world. A stylized umbrella in Domanska's What do You See? looked "like wood" to a first grader.

Heuristic talk seemed to take children beyond the pointing stage to serve a questioning purpose. Children often wondered about the illustrations. "I wonder what he's doing?' mused a first grader looking at a robber hiding behind a tree in The Bremen Town Musicians. Looking at the heroine of Sendak's Outside Over There floating on a yellow raincoat, a first grader asked, "How could she fly?" A classmate answered, "cause it's a special raincoat." His comment reflects a further use for heuristic language--language to make predictions or inferences about the ilustrations. A third-grade boy suggested that The Song of the Horse might have really been a dream "because black and white--that's how I see my dreams." Two fourth-grade girls (who'd spent many months with Outside Over There) suggested that the storm and sinking ship pictured through a window on succeeding pages of the book represented the heroine's feelings. "She has to take care of the baby and that's her responsibility and she feels bad, and that's why the storm is there."

Children used the heuristic function to wonder or make inferences about the artists' techniques as well as the pictorial text. "It looks like it's

been painted," said a first grader of the impasto strokes in We Be Warm Til Springtime Comes. "You can see the brush [strokes] coming down." Third and fourth graders correctly surmised that (Nikkly) Shubb has used paint in The Emperor's Plum Tree. "There's kind of little dots. You wouldn't be able to do that with anything else." "Like someone took a toothbrush."

A third function of language used in talking about picture books was "imaginative"--language that allowed children to enter the world of the picture book. "I'm thinking I'm the dog. No, I want to be the cat," said a first grader looking at Domanska's Bremen Town Musicians. Kit, a third grader, actually assumed the role of the woodcutter as she looked at the woodcutter facing the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood. "So here you are, you old sinner. I've been looking for you all these years and now this is where I find you," she exclaimed in her best gruff woodcutter's voice.

The imaginative function was often used to create new forms or to make the unfamiliar familiar through the use of metaphors or similes. First and second graders referred to Tomie De Paola's distinctive clouds as "pumpy" or "like mashed potatoes." A first-grade boy suggested that the ripples of foam spreading out behind the rowboat in Shulevitz's Dawn was like "whipped cream that men put on to shave." A third grader thought the image of the moon in Jonas' Round Trip resembled a goblin while another third grader compared the smoke in Browne's Hansel and Gretel to a centipede.

At other times imaginative language represented an inner mental reorganization or creation of new images. Adam, a first grader told me that when I'd read The Bremen Town Musicians to him (without showing illustrations) he'd thought of pictures that resembled Donna Diamond's black and white impressionistic drawings of the story. "But then," he stated, "I asked my mind to change it into color." The first-grade girls compared Diamond's black

and white drawings in Jumanji.

"Jumanji's got a little bit more colors," Nina stated.

"Colors?" I asked.

"See the game board," she replied.

"It looks like all different colors, doesn't it?" her friend agreed.

"And like when you just turn it and you can see white and you can see a little bit red." added Nina.

Many of the comments children made about picture books served a personal function. The objects or events in picture books would remind children of something in their personal lives. The patterns in Domanska's What Do You See? reminded a first grader of her bathroom wallpaper, while events in We Be Warm Til Springtime Comes recalled personal milestones to a second grader:

"Cause you know, they were wishing spring would come, but it was winter. Just like I'm hoping spring will come - that's when my First Communion is."

A fourth-grade girl used personal language to describe Zwerger's hazy watercolor paintings Hansel and Gretel. She compared the illustrations to pictures on her television screen. "It's broken," she said, "When you turn the contrast it gets all fuzzy."

Books often aroused expressions of personal feelings among children. First and second graders exclaimed, "Don't show that picture, it's so sad!" as they looked at a closeup of a dog with porcupine quills in his muzzle. A third grader said The Song of the Horse made her feel "silky." "Like I'm far away on the moon or something."

The personal function also called for expressions of opinions about books. First and second graders often tied in evaluations of a book with their feelings about it. A book was a "good book because I liked it." Older

children began to be more objective in expressing opinions and to consider criteria for judging the qualities of a book. A third grader thought Round Trip was a good book because "it really challenges your imagination, and if you cover up the words you could keep doing it again and again and find out all sorts of different things about the little secrets."

As children used language for many purposes in reading picture books, their comments showed them to be developing more critical thinking not only in cognitive factors but in aesthetic awareness as well. They seemed to become increasingly aware that the artist, like the author, is a person who makes choices in conveying meaning (figure 2). First and second graders were somewhat unsure about the artists' reasons for making choices. Several children stated that Domanska used bright contrasting colors in The Bremen Town Musicians "because he [sic] just didn't want to make them the same way." (As other versions of the story.) Third and fourth graders seemed to better undertstand that such choices were consciously made by artists. A third grader mused that Zwerger "meant to put white up here and dark down there," in Hansel and Gretel. "It gives me a dream feeling like I'm going to sleep and that's probably what the effect is supposed to do.

At all grade levels, children talked about the artists' choices in pictorial content. They noticed what artists did not include: "You never see the Dad's face, only his back," said a third grader of Zwerger's Hansel and Gretel, and the many small details which artists often include--tiny mice which carry on pictorial subplots in Peter Spiers' books, or a tiny bottle of Oil of Olay on the bureau in Browne's Hansel and Gretel.

Also talked about were technical choices such as original media, end papers, type faces, and layout. Two third and fourth graders wondered why several illustrations in Zwerger's Hansel and Gretel did not extend to the

edges of the page but left uneven white margins on either side. One suggested, "Maybe he did this when he was on a trip or something. He saw those people that looked like his characters and he had a special size of paper and he couldn't blow it up." His friend responded, "They shoulda put something there in the margin, something flying. A bird or something."

The children also mentioned elements of design used by artists. While first and second graders talked about lines, shapes, colors, texture, bright colors or light on faces (value) they did not seem cognizant of the emotive power of such elements. When third and fourth graders discussed design elements, however, they often tied them into their feelings about the book. "Those pictures look sad, they don't have a certain shape to them" "The lines sort of make it look detailed and the detail makes it look scary," or "some of the colors make it sort of sad - the browns, and they use purple to show evil, I would guess."

When trying to apply abstract stylistic terms to an artist's work, children were not always successful--confusing terms like realism, expressionism, or impressionism. Adam, a first grader, insisted the highly stylized pictures in Aardema's Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain looked "real because giraffes have big spots," or that Domanska's abstract grey bird in What Do You See? (figure 3) looked real because "it's got the normal colors of a bird." Several third graders felt that Galdone's sketchy pencil and wash drawings were "realistic" because they had "a lot of lines."

When they ceased trying to place pictures in stylistic pigeon holes, however, their comments were often remarkably close to the heart of an artist's style. Artist Maurice Sendak, for example, pays homage to nineteenth century German painters in Outside Over There, and his lush landscapes are evocative of the Northern Renaissance paintings of Peter Brueghel. Looking at

the book. first and second graders remarked that the pictures looked "antique" or "from the Bible," and that the babies looked like "Jesus babies" (babies in paintings of the nativity he had seen at Christmas time). Chris Van Allsburg is primarily a sculptor, and his illustrations reflect the three dimensional quality of the medium of stone or clay. A first grader stated that the pictures in Jumanji looked like clay, while a third grader remarked that the wave in Wreck of the Zephyr "looks like it's a stone wall because it's three dimensional."

In fact, Adam's insistence that the pictures in Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain looked "real" was perhaps more valid than any stylistic labels we adults might have applied; for the match between the rhythmic patterned text from the African Plain, and the rhythmic patterns of the art in the book is a true one and may have made this book come alive for Adam--made it "real."

Curious to compare the responses of these children to findings of earlier preference studies which found children preferred color to black and white, I asked if books with black and white illustrations would have been better in color. A second grade boy explained that Jumanji's black and white drawings required careful looking. "It's hard when it's in black and white. It takes time, and you don't just whip through the book. You like to take time." And although Tessie, a fourth grader, agreed that she liked colorful illustrations, she thought black and white was appropriate for Song of the Horse. "I thought he made it really beautiful without using colors," she explained, "Because otherwise you would just look at the colors and say 'Oh, that's real pretty.' but there's something more than pictures to it.

Tessie and the other children in this study are coming close to a true understanding of the essence of the art object that is the picture book--more than pictures, more than words--a combination of ideas and feelings that

together have created new and richer metaphors for experience.

The children's comments about these and other books show that in environments which encourage thinking, language, and reading, children can become active constructors of affective as well as cognitive meaning, developing insights which take them far beneath the surface of literary or pictorial preference to more critical and long-lasting understanding which may touch all areas of learning. When we give children the opportunity to spend time with picture books, to look carefully, to think long, to talk and read and write about them, we can create the kind of environment where magic happens, not just once in a while, but every day.

1. Informative

   1.1 Report the contents of the picture

   1.2 Compare what is in the picture to some aspect of the real world

   1.3 Compare one book to another book

   1.4 Describe or narrate pictured events

2. Heuristic

   2.1 Wonder about events in pictures or preparation of illustrations

   2.2 Infer cause of pictured events or preparation of illustrations

   2.3 Predict outcomes or events from pictures

3. Imaginative

   3.1 Enter the world of the book as a character or an onlooker

   3.2 Create figurative language

   3.3 Describe mental images

4. Personal

   4.1 Associate personal experience with book

   4.2 Express feelings

   4.3 Evaluate

Figure 1. Functional categories for children's verbal responses to picture books

1. Design choices

    1.1 Elements of design: line, shape, color, value, texture

    1.2 Principles of Design: composition, balance

2. Technical choices

    2.1 Original media

    2.2 End papers

    2.3 Typography

    2.4 Paper

    2.5 Pictorial content

    2.6 Point of view

3. Pictorial conventions

    3.1 Historical conventions

    3.2 Cultural conventions

Figure 2. Style in picture books, choices the artist makes in expressing meaning.

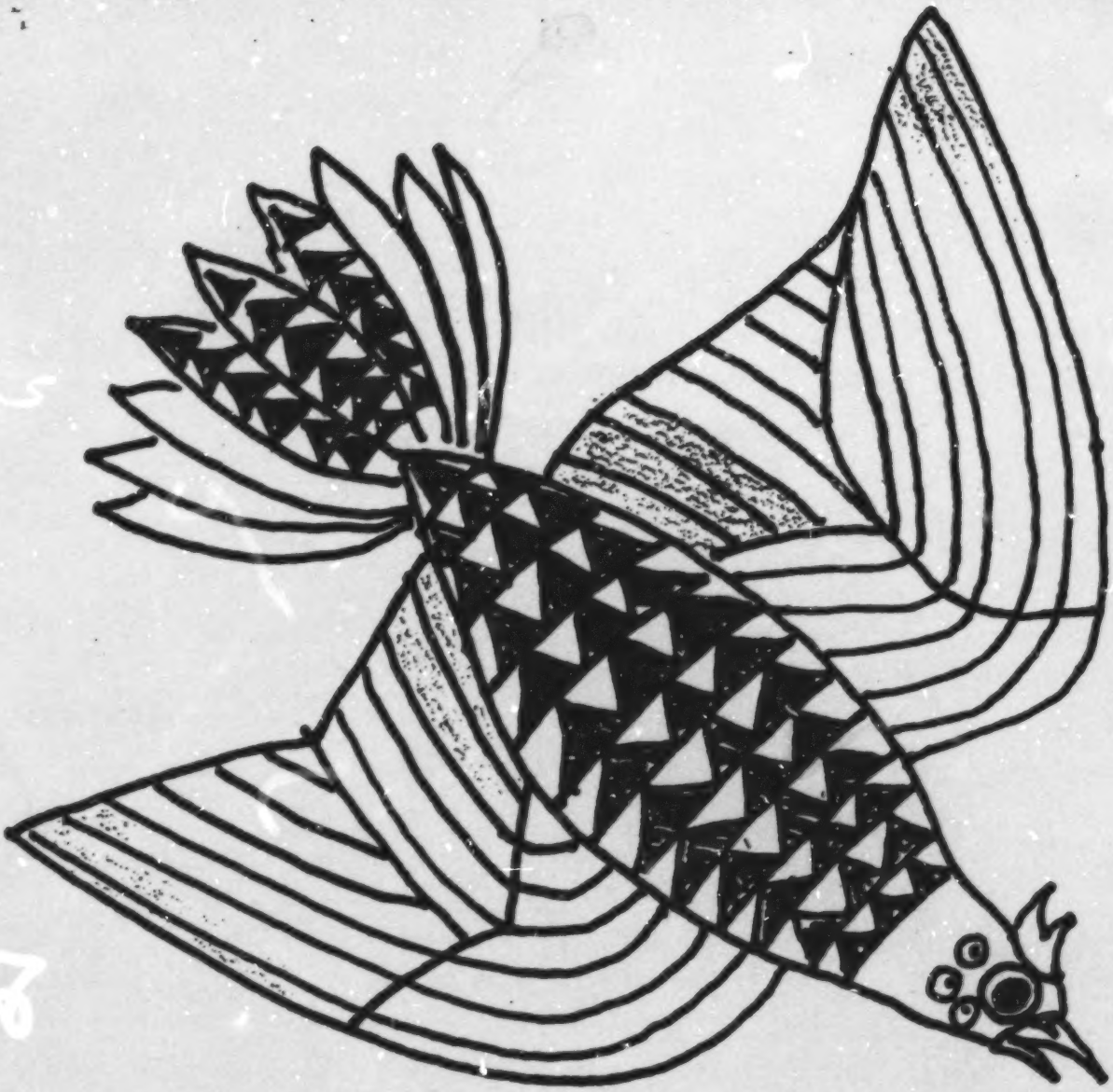

Figure 3 - Facsimile of drawing from Domanska's

What Do You See

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